

KEEPING THE MAGIC IN MONTANA

Through the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Foundation, ordinary people can help conserve grizzlies, elk, state parks, and other natural and cultural resources that make Big Sky Country such an enchanting place.

BY LEE LAMB

When the Wetzsteons decided to sell their southern Bitterroot Valley ranch, they could have made a fortune. Real estate agents regularly knocked on their door, offering a premium price for the 367 acres of timbered, rolling hills and lush pastures surrounded by scenic, snowcapped mountains. But the ranching family envisioned a different future for the land they had worked for generations. Instead of paved streets, padlocked gates, and million-dollar log homes, the Wetzsteons wanted their property to be a place where wildlife—and people—could roam freely. The family didn't have to look far to find a buyer with a similar vision.

For years, biologists with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks had known about the parcel and the nearly 1,000 elk that use the land. Deer, bears, mountain lions, and other wildlife also live there. The Wetzsteons had worked with FWP to manage elk and provide public hunting on their land through the Block Management Program. The ranching family had even volunteered to help the agency capture and radio-collar elk as part of a research project. Word got out that the ranch was for sale, and FWP officials took notice. "When a parcel of private land is available from a willing seller and is surrounded by state and federal land—and also supports the highest density of wintering elk in the Bitterroot Valley—it's definitely one this agency will work hard to secure," says FWP director Jeff Hagener.

After some negotiation, transfer of the Wetzsteon ranch into public ownership was ready to go except for one small detail: FWP couldn't meet the family's full asking price. State law requires that the department pay no more than the appraised value for land, which was \$62,500 short of what the Wetzsteons needed. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation agreed to help raise the remaining funds, so it called on one of FWP's funding partners, the nonprofit Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Foundation, which donated \$26,000 to the



BEAR DOGS The FWP Foundation has been a major funder of a Wind River Bear Institute program that teaches grizzlies to stay away from human habitation using fearless Karelian bear dogs. The breed originated in Finland, where it was used to hold brown bears at bay. The nonlethal "bear shepherding," which also employs pepper spray and noisemakers, saves the lives of troublesome grizzlies that otherwise would be killed to protect public safety.

DEREK REICH/ZOOPRAX PRODUCTIONS

project. Other conservation partners made up the difference, and in April 2007, the land was acquired to support wildlife and remain open to public use.

Though the foundation's contribution was just a fraction of the Wetzsteon property's final \$688,000 sale price, it was a crucial one. "The FWP Foundation came through at a critical time to help us and the department complete this acquisition," says Mike Mueller, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's senior lands program manager. "We know there were people around the country who would have paid a lot more for such a prime piece of land, so we're fortunate we got it when we did."

FILLING THE GAPS

Helping FWP with critical purchases such as the Wetzsteon acquisition is part of what the FWP Foundation was designed to do. Created in 1999, the foundation raises private funds for projects beyond the scope of what FWP can spend using hunting and fishing license proceeds, the department's primary funding source. "Hunters and anglers can take a great deal of credit for providing the funds to produce and sustain Montana's fish and wildlife," says Hagener. "But the need for new funding continues to increase. The foundation helps fill the gap between existing funding sources and ever-increasing demands for more conservation work."

The FWP Foundation's eight-member board of directors meets quarterly to review and select projects. According to George Bettas, the foundation's director of development, the organization has raised \$4.5 million, primarily through foundation grants, philanthropic donations, and corporate partnerships. Eighty-five percent of the projects funded so far have been submitted by FWP staff. The foundation also provides funding to other Montana organizations dedicated to conserving the state's resources.

"I don't have to tell anyone that Montana is a special place. But keeping it that way for our great-grandkids to appreciate and enjoy is the challenge," says Spence Hegstad, FWP Foundation executive director and a former FWP commission chairman. "The founda-

Lee Lamb is a writer in Pablo.



HELPING ELK AND RANCHERS The FWP Foundation oversees a trust fund that has purchased 5,548 acres of elk wintering range in the Elkhorn Mountains. The foundation also supports a program that increases landowner tolerance for elk in the Madison Valley.

tion gives folks who love this state for its beauty, wildlife, and history the opportunity to put some of their personal resources into conservation projects that can really make a difference. By bringing the public, other conservation groups, and state and federal agencies together, we can accomplish much more to preserve what I like to call the 'magic' that is Montana."

One "magical" element is the state's grizzly bear population, the management of which the foundation has been helping support since its inception. The first project assisted FWP with more than \$1 million in funding for a Wind River Bear Institute (WRBI) program that helps bears and people coexist. The core element of the program is "bear shepherding," which teaches grizzlies to stay away from humans using specially trained Karelian bear dogs, in combination with other aversive conditioning tools such as red pepper spray, rubber bullets, and cracker shells. By also teaching residents how to live in bear country, the WRBI reduces the number of grizzly conflicts in northwestern Montana that might result in bears harming people or damaging private property.

CABINET-YAOK GRIZZLIES

In 2006, the WRBI grizzly program had enough support from other sources that the

FWP Foundation was able to step aside and put funding into another essential grizzly project. Overall, grizzly bear populations are doing well in Montana—so well that in 2007 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed grizzlies living in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem from the Endangered Species List and is evaluating the possibility of delisting other populations in Montana (see "State of the Grizzly," March–April 2008). But grizzlies have struggled in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, an isolated area in northeastern Montana containing few people and abundant bear habitat. Since 2005, using foundation funds, FWP biologists have captured two young female grizzlies from near Glacier National Park and transplanted them into the Cabinet Mountains, hoping to augment the existing bear population. Biologists say the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem currently holds 30 to 40 grizzlies but has enough habitat to support 90 to 120. Researchers are monitoring the transplanted bears to see if they remain in the area and reproduce with resident males.

The FWP Foundation also helps fund a cooperative cattle grazing program in the Madison Valley. The Upper Madison Wildlife/Livestock Partnership works on improving range conditions and providing landowners with additional livestock grazing



DEREK REICH

opportunities. The aim is to increase landowner tolerance for elk wintering on their property while enhancing and supporting the valley's ranching economy. Landowners who have grass to share, or have a high elk tolerance, provide livestock grazing opportunities for ranchers whose pastures are hard hit by the foraging ungulates.

FWP Foundation dollars go beyond wildlife and wild country. They helped fund the stabilization and re-roofing of the Meade Hotel, the centerpiece of Montana's first territorial capital, Bannack, and now a popular ghost town and state park. The foundation also acts as a repository for funds raised through the state parks specialty license plate program. In addition, it holds dollars raised for TIP-MONT, an FWP program that offers rewards for information resulting in the capture of poachers and others who illegally degrade Montana's natural, historic, or cultural resources.

Another foundation responsibility is managing the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust. In 1998, federal legislation allowed 265 cabin owners leasing recreation

BEAR BUILDING Tim Manley, FWP grizzly bear specialist, fits a sedated female with a GPS collar. This was the first bear to be moved to the Cabinet Mountains in a grizzly augmentation project funded by the FWP Foundation. The project has since transported another grizzly to the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem. Below: The FWP Foundation also paid to put a new roof on the historic Meade Hotel at Bannack State Park.



TIM CODY

lots at Canyon Ferry Reservoir near Helena to purchase their property from the Bureau of Reclamation. Ninety percent of the proceeds were deposited into the conservation trust. Funds are used to support work by conservation groups for restoring fish and wildlife habitat and acquiring public land access for hunting and fishing.

Hegstad says the FWP Foundation monitored the sale of the cabin sites (completed in 2005) and is now responsible for investing the proceeds and disbursing the funds. Projects funded by the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust are recommended by a joint state-federal advisory board after consulting with a citizen advisory group and other members of the public. The trust has provided more than \$2 million to support projects such as one that acquired 5,548 acres of big game wintering range in the Elkhorn Mountain foothills. Another purchased 204 acres harboring 5 miles of Cedar Creek near Superior. “That’s one of only four viable bull trout spawning streams in the entire middle reach of the Clark Fork River,” Hegstad says. The trust also provided funding to FWP to purchase access rights and fishing access sites near Glendive and Miles City.

TEACHING CONSERVATION TO KIDS

Public conservation education is another FWP Foundation priority. The foundation is working to raise \$3.6 million to complete the second phase of what is being called the Montana Wildlife Complex, in Helena. In 2000, the foundation helped raise money to build the first phase of the complex, the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. The facility, run by FWP and located next to Spring Meadow Lake State Park, temporarily cares for orphaned, sick, and injured animals—primarily bear cubs—until they can be returned to the wild (or, for bears too habituated to humans, taken to zoos). Phase two is an education center in the historic 7,000-square-foot Stedman foundry building, which sits next to the wildlife rehab center. Now partially completed, the new facility will contain interpretive displays, classrooms, a combination theater and multipurpose room, and a gift shop. Outside, a flowing coldwater stream and a pond will be sited next to an amphitheater. “Our goal with the



BRIAN SHINY/MONTANA FWP

MANY BENEFICIARIES The foundation helps fund TIP-MONT, which encourages hunters and other citizens to report poaching. The foundation’s most ambitious project is to raise \$3.6 million for a new education center (artist’s rendition below), next to Spring Meadow Lake State Park in Helena in the historic Stedman foundry building. “We want the new center to instill in visitors an appreciation for Montana’s diverse land and water environments and the fish and wildlife that live there, says Jeff Hagener, FWP director.



MONTANA FWP FOUNDATION

education center is to teach students, residents, and tourists about Montana’s diverse wildlife and habitat resources through interactive programs and hands-on learning,” says Hagener, the FWP director. “But we also want visitors to realize that they are the backbone behind those resources. We need their support and input if we want to continue conserving and managing Montana’s fish, wildlife, and their habitats.”

Hagener’s public-involvement message resonates with Earl Sherron, FWP Foundation board chairman and a former FWP commissioner. “As a foundation or an agency, we can

dream big about building a premier wildlife education center, or boosting grizzly populations in the Cabinets,” he says. “But the fact remains that we can’t do anything without the help of conservation groups, philanthropists, and ordinary folks who care enough about Montana’s resources to contribute to the cause.” 🐻



To learn more about the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Foundation and its accomplishments or to make a donation, visit mfwpfoundation.org, or call (406) 444-6759.